

# What can the sociology of race learn from the histories of anti-colonialism?

Ethnicities

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## Abstract

This essay looks at three books on the histories of anti-colonialism: Desai's *the United States of India*, Getachew's *Worldmaking after Empire*, and Gopal's *Insurgent Empire*. I argue that despite it not being the authors' primary focus, these books collectively push forward the sociology of race. In particular, each of these books shows the importance for contemporary race and racism scholarship to adopt a transnational, temporally connected approach which is able to both study and forge global anti-colonial solidarities.

## Keywords

Anti-colonialism, decolonisation, race, racism, sociology of race

Desai, Manan. 2020. *The United States of India: Anticolonial Literature and Transnational Refraction*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Getachew, Adom. 2019. *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Gopal, Priyamvada. 2019. *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonialism and the Making of British Dissent*. London: Verso.

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In the midst of a global pandemic in 2020, the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked anti-racist protests across the world. Many of these protests drew links between their nation's racism and their nation's colonial history. Thus, protests in France connected Floyd's death with their own state violence against post-colonial citizens from North Africa, Portuguese protestors carried placards stating: 'Racism is colonial heritage', and in Belgium, protestors tore down the statue of King Leopold II. Of course, statues were not only targeted in Belgium, but were a target throughout the world, with statues of Cecil Rhodes, for instance, being taken down in both Cape Town and Oxford. Within Britain, debates over such statues of colonial figures took centre-stage during the protests. To some, the fact that figures such as Edward Colston, a key figure in Britain's role in enslavement, were not just put up on a pedestal, but that their statue plaques also described them (in Colston's case) as 'one of the most virtuous and wise sons of the city', was evidence that Britain was yet to fully confront its colonial past.

In this review, I am not concerned with statues as much as with the linkages between imperialism, colonialism, and racism. Nevertheless, this ongoing contestation over the existence of colonial statues feeds into a key point of this essay – namely, that the pasts of empire, colonialism, and imperialism still shape the material and epistemic contours of the present. Thus, in Britain, for example, those protesting against colonial statues were claiming that this is a contemporary issue: by failing to bring a critical eye to colonial history and historical figures, Britain was making a statement in *the present day* as to which histories, knowledges, and people they value. Similarly, when Black Lives Matter protestors took to the streets across Kenya, they were not only concerned with the systematic underdevelopment of their country through its former colonial rule, but also with the *present reality* of police brutality that was institutionalized during this colonialism – and, indeed, such protestors thus used the example of police brutality to draw inherent connections between the neo-colonial violence in Kenya with the state racism practiced in the United States.

The problem, as it stands, is that much contemporary sociology of race elides these transnational and temporal connections between racism, colonialism, and imperialism. Especially over the past few decades, we have seen the flourishing of theories of race and racism that have tended to focus on the empirical realities of the United States bifurcated from its past and present imperial relations (such as systemic racism theory, critical race theory, and racial formation theory). This is where these three reviewed books come into play.

Neither Priyamvada Gopal's (2019) *Insurgent Empire*, Adom Getachew's (2019) *Worldmaking after Empire*, or Manan Desai's *The United States of India* are primarily about the sociology of race; indeed, as far as I am aware, none of these authors consider themselves to be 'sociologists'. Nevertheless, each of these authors, in their examinations of historical anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism, make significant contributions to the sociology of race. In particular, each of these texts shows the necessity for the sociology of race to become more receptive to historical analysis, and more appreciative to how the power relations

of colonialism forged hundreds of years ago ended up *surviving the collapse of colonial administrations*. I will briefly review each of the texts' core arguments, before highlighting the significant shifts they develop in sociology.

## Imagining anticolonial freedoms: 1857–2020

Getachew's (2019), Gopal's (2019), and Desai's (2020) books are all published within months of each other, and it is a shame that the authors did not have the chance to fully engage with each other's works. Each of these books take different empirical moments, topics, and historical trajectories to reflect on the same fundamental process – that of the transnational struggles against empire, imperialism, racism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism.

Gopal's (2019) *Insurgent Empire* perhaps has the largest historical scope of the three books, with the first chapter discussing the 1857 Indian uprisings, and the Epilogue turning to recent phenomena such as Brexit, New Labour, and the Obama years. Focusing on the British empire, Gopal's (2019: 447) book is intended to be a direct rebuttal of the 'tenacious colonial mythology in which Britain – followed by the remainder of the geopolitical West – is the wellspring of ideas of freedom, either "bestowing" it on slaves and colonial subjects or "teaching" them how to go about obtaining it'. In contrast to this 'Whig historiography', Gopal presciently shows how concepts of freedom, equality, and social justice which developed in the metropolises were actually shaped by *anticolonial dissent*. Central to Gopal's book, therefore, is the premise that anticolonial agency and activism created concepts of liberty, freedom, independence, and social justice *which shaped the metropole's own articulation of these same concepts*.

This process of anticolonial epistemic activism – what Gopal refers to as 'reverse tutelage' – can be seen in 'the pedagogical work of anticolonial campaigners and intellectuals in the metropole' (Gopal, 2019: 398). Throughout *Insurgent Empire*, Gopal recalls the trials and tribulations of anticolonial activists and intellectuals working from within the nucleus of the British empire, including Shapurji Saklatvala, George Padmore, Claude McKay and C. L. R. James, through to Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta. Here, Gopal's analysis pays attention to how such intellectuals developed anti-colonial organisations in the metropolises, and how through these organisations, such anticolonial intellectuals formed *epistemic links* with the British left in a way that fundamentally shifted established conceptions of freedom and visions of the British empire. This includes, for instance radicals such as Amy Ashwood Garvey, Eric Williams, Jomo Kenyatta, I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson, T. Ras Makonnen, and Nnamdi Azikiwe forming the International African Friends of Ethiopia (IAFE) as a 'global black coalition of resistance' against Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in 1935. While Britain and other Western states saw Italy's invasion of Abyssinia as a violation of European peace treaties, the IAFE provided a counter-narrative to the established concepts of liberty and international law by reconceptualising Italy's practices as being a violation of the liberties of Black, Ethiopian people. Through focusing on the

violations of Black subjects' freedoms, rather than European political law (which actively endorsed colonialism), the IAFE was thus able to encourage large sectors of the British Left – including members of parliament such as Arthur Jones, Ellen Wilkinson, Noel Baker, and Denis Pritt – to spot the links between Italy's brutal invasion of an African state with Britain's own colonial occupation across the same continent.

Such links between European fascism and Western colonialism were also teased out by C.L.R James and George Padmore in their work at the magazine *The New Leader* in the 1930s, as well as their other publications. In fact, prior to their involvement at *The New Leader*, this magazine had tended to only focus on anti-colonialism in the Indian context. By bringing the Caribbean and Africa into the picture, especially Padmore was able to better theorize what he termed as 'fascist-imperialism'. In this period, mainstream political discourse in Britain was happy to use the label of fascism to describe the political apparatuses of Hitler and Mussolini, but was unwilling to use that same label to describe their own empire. By contrast, Padmore's concept of fascist-imperialism held that European fascism and Western colonialism were two sides of the same coin, both stemming from a vehement belief in racial hierarchy and national superiority. To anticolonial intellectuals, therefore, there was a fundamental tension in mainstream British political practice whereby – in Padmore's words – 'British imperialists' were pretending 'to be fighting those "evil things – brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution" [...] and at the same time practis[ing] Hitler's methods in the colonies' (Gopal, 2019: 384–385). Moreover, just as the IAFE inspired members of the British left to engage in anti-colonial critique, so too did Padmore's concept of fascist-imperialism encourage the British left to understand how British colonialism could be reframed as the very political project of fascism that Britain was so quick to denounce. Key members of the British left thus came to critique this hypocrisy at the nucleus of British society, with Arthur Ballard, for instance, stating that the British empire produced 'conditions [in their colonies] equal to those within the Fascist countries' (Gopal, 2019: 377), and Dinah Stock exclaiming that Britain fixes 'indignant eyes on Hitler and Mussolini, and persuade themselves that the fascism of their own Empire is somehow less important' (Gopal, 2019: 382). Gopal's *Insurgent Empire*, therefore, highlights how anticolonial intellectuals and organisations within the metropolises created an infrastructure through which British conceptions of liberty, humanism, civilization, and fascism, could be rethought in a way that centred the liberty and agency of colonized people.

Thus, at a more abstract level, underlying Gopal's book is a counter narrative to dominant representations of the British empire. As captured in Boris Johnson's recent comments on Britain not needing to have a 'cringing embarrassment' about its previous empire, and needing to stop 'this general fight of self-recrimination and wetness', the dominant conception of the British empire – as kept alive in our school curricula and mainstream political discourse – is that the empire was a benevolent fighting-force for good that spread civilization to all corners of the

world. Through this account, much more attention is focused on how British abolitionists helped dismantle the slave trade, how the empire trounced the evils of Nazism, created a prosperous Commonwealth in which previous colonies could thrive, and welcomed postcolonial citizens into their 'mother country', rather than the darker side of these very same historical processes: Britain only had abolitionists because they were central in the slave trade to begin with, they may have helped defeat the Nazis but they practiced the same racialized violence upon their colonial subjects, and they may have granted nominal independence to previous colonies but they continued to exert political and economic control over these new nation states. Within this self-representation, the agency of the colonized people thus becomes largely obscured, aside from such figures as Gandhi and Mandela. Instead, we get a double-edged myth that either the colonized people were given freedom by the British empire after they had become sufficiently civilized for self-rule, or they simply used the colonizer's concepts (of the nation state, self-determination, or liberty) to secure their independence. In direct contrast to this double-edged myth, Gopal (2019: 24) highlights the process of *reverse tutelage*, characterised by 'metropolitan dissidents learn[ing] something from their anticolonial interlocutors and the movements they represented.' In this epistemic shift, Gopal highlights how it was through the work of the anti-colonial intellectuals and organisations – such as Padmore's theorisation of fascist-imperialism, or the IAFE's resistance to colonialism in across Africa – that members of the mainstream British left came to fully understand, and consequently stand against, the British empire.

This concept of 'reverse tutelage' is also captured in Desai's (2020) notion of 'transnational refraction' which is so central to his book, *The United States of India*. Such transnational refraction is described by Desai (2020: 3) as 'a means of seeing oneself in the transnational other'. Desai looks at this process of seeing oneself in the other through focusing on post-World War One Indian anti-imperialists in the United States, and how this group of writers – both Indian and non-Indian descendants – drew connections between British colonialism in India with US racism, and global capitalism more broadly. Within this empirical focus on the United States and India, Desai (2020: 18–19) focuses on the writings and lives of Lajpat Rai, Agnes Smedley, Dhan Gopal Mukerji, Du Bois, and Katherine Mayo, showing how each of these thinkers demonstrated transnational refraction in the way that they 'capture[d] the assemblage of transnational gazes, reflections, distortions, and perspective' which enabled them 'to actively think and write about each other's political struggles'. This transnational refraction took three forms.

Firstly, such refraction happened through the lens of 'comparison'. This often involved the writers at hand drawing direct similarities between racism in the United States with British colonialism in India. Such comparison making can be seen, for instance, in Rai's *The United States of America: A Hindu's Impression and a Study*, where he argues that there is 'some analogy between the Negro problem in the United States of America and the problem of the depressed classes in India'

(quoted in Desai, 2020: 19), and his *The United States of India*, where he drew direct comparisons between racist segregation in the United States with caste-based segregation in India. Such comparisons between American racism and caste in India were also teased out by some of Rai's Black radical contemporaries who he encountered on his travels in the United States; one such contemporary was W.E.B. Du Bois. Similarly to Rai, Du Bois argued that Indians under British occupation and Black people in the United States face 'the same terrible battle of the color bar', facing similar social processes of spatial segregation, physical violence, exclusion from educational, political, and economic institutions, and stigmatization. While both Rai and Du Bois appreciated that India and the United States had their own particularities, as Du Bois articulated himself, they were both attentive to how it was 'the same color line that ran through Mississippi, Harlem, and Chicago [that] ran through places like Bombay and Johannesburg' (quoted in Desai, 2020: 144). In other words, both Rai and Du Bois made use of comparison in order to tease out how the global colour line was capable of expressing itself in a multitude of ways: from chattel slavery and Jim Crow, through to apartheid and caste segregation.

Secondly, such analyses of comparison also encouraged a transnational refraction characterised by *identification*. Here, the writers at hand were not just *comparing* different struggles for social justice in different parts of the world, but identifying the similar social processes and mechanisms which essentially *connected* them, as well as identifying with other people's experiences of marginality in order to foster a radical solidarity. Agnes Smedley – a white, working class woman from New York – for instance, drew on her own experiences of sexual violence and economic destitution to – in her own words – identify 'myself with the poor and enslaved' (quoted in Desai, 2020: 83). Smedley did not just draw on experiential identification with Black people in the United States, and Indians under colonial rule, but also identified the same process that tied them together – and, indeed, the same process that related to her own experiences of marginality and exclusion – namely, capitalism. Through her engagement with Indian radicals such as Rai, Tarak Nath Das, and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (who was also her abuser), Smedley thus argued that the liberation of workers across the West firstly required a liberation of the colonies.

Through such comparisons and identifications, these intellectuals also facilitated a transnational refraction characterised by *disruption*. This disruption is described by Desai (2020: 21) as 'challenging, recoding, disturbing, or at times parodying dominant discourses of nationalism, immigration, and Orientalism'. Consider, for instance, the American writer Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* – a stereotypical work of Orientalism which drew upon her experiences of Calcutta to argue that Indian people were uncivilized and unfit for national sovereignty, and that their high rates of squalor, deviance, and disease would wreak havoc on American society if they were allowed to immigrate. In response to this Orientalism and xenophobia, Indian writers drew upon their own experiences of living in the United States to critique the idea of inherent Western superiority.



Kanhaya Lal Gauba's *Uncle Sham*, for instance, highlighted how the United States' 'vaunted liberty' was in deep tension with the country's 'racial distinction, discrimination and antipathy' (Desai, 2020: 179), while Rai, in his *Unhappy India*, rearticulated Mayo's phrase of Indians as a 'world menace', arguing instead that 'White imperialism is the greatest world menace known to history' (quoted in Desai, 2020: 189).

At the heart of Desai's (2020: 198) book, therefore, is an invitation to 'to take seriously the strange and sometimes surprising direction that such refractions take', and to drive forward the possibilities of social analysis through tracking transnational flows of ideas and experiences. As Desai (2020: 198) clarifies this ethic: 'What political possibilities open up when we consider the ways that Lajpat Rai and W.E.B. Du Bois found friendship through their shared struggle against the global color line?' It is this concept of political *possibilities* that I think it is worth reflecting on, because, as Desai reminds us throughout the book, transnational refraction allows for *possible* forms of resistance and social justice rather than necessarily realising them. Throughout this book, for instance, Desai balances an appreciation of Indian anti-colonialism, with a reflection on how many instances of this anti-colonialism also laid the epistemic foundations for an exclusionary Hindu nationalism. This issue of anti-colonialism and nationalism leads us perfectly on to the final book being reviewed in this essay: Getachew's (2019) *Worldmaking After Empire*.

Getachew's (2019: 2) book holds that while decolonization is seen as a moment of 'nation-building [...] and the formation of nation-states', instead, we ought to see anticolonial nationalism itself as an exercise in 'worldmaking'. In other words, Getachew recasts anticolonial nationalism itself as a transnational process, seeking an equitable remaking of the world to overcome the injustices of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Getachew's (2019: 5) book thus signals a gestalt shift in the way that she envisages anticolonial nationalism *not* as 'marking the collapse of internationalism and the closure of alternative conceptions of a world after empire', but instead as a direct, transnational confrontation to 'the legacies of imperial hierarchy with a demand for the radical reconstitution of the international order'. Through focusing explicitly on Nnamdi Azikiwe, W.E.B. Du Bois, Michael Manley, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, George Padmore, and Eric Williams, Getachew focuses on three forms of anticolonial worldmaking.

Firstly, Getachew explores the anticolonial demand for the right to self-determination. Central to Getachew's (2019: 75) argument is that anticolonial nationalists did not simply 'take up' the West's discourse of self-determination and use it to secure their own independence, but – similarly to how Gopal (2019) looks at anticolonial iterations of liberty, freedom, and justice – through an 'anticolonial appropriation' such nationalists radically reconceptualised the meaning of self-determination. Thus, as it was first articulated by the League of Nations, self-determination involved 'the consent of the governed and consultation with subject people'; however, this definition still allowed for colonialism given that 'racially backwards people' were said to not yet be capable of self-governance

(Getachew, 2019: 42). Years after the League of Nations, the United Nations (UN) Charter of 1945 again evoked 'human rights and equality of nations [...] as founding principles of a new world order' despite the continuity of colonial rule (Getachew, 2019: 71). By contrast, anticolonial radicals – through forming organisations and conferences such as the League against Imperialism, and the Pan-African Congresses – directly highlighted the hypocrisy of the Westernized definition of self-determination. For instance, Nkrumah and Padmore organised the fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester, 1945, where the epistemic roots were planted for self-determination to be *reconceptualised as a universalist issue of human rights*. Through showing how colonialism itself was a violation of human rights, the work of anticolonial nationalists radically shifted the discourse of self-determination such that by 1960, when Nkrumah spoke to the UN as the president of Ghana, he was able to use the principle of self-determination to show how colonialism was directly against the UN's principles, thus leading to the Article 1514 Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Peoples and Countries.

Secondly, Getachew looks at anticolonial nationalist worldmaking through focusing on the formation of regional federations. As Getachew (2019: 113) shows, to such anticolonial nationalists, sovereignty granted through the right to self-determination was 'meaningless in the context of international hierarchy and economic dependence'. This relates to Nkrumah's critique of neo-imperialism, described as 'the disjuncture between formal independence and de facto dependence' (Getachew, 2019: 108), whereby nation states have 'nominal freedom' yet remain economically dependent on the Global North and thus vulnerable to political domination through financial control. In response to this neo-imperialism, radicals like Nkrumah and Eric Williams saw federations – such as the Union of African States or the West Indian Federation – as providing the potential for economic trade and development that did not require foreign intervention and reliance on the Global North. This is why, for instance, upon Ghana becoming a republic in 1960, Nkrumah's nationalism also involved successfully advocating for a clause in the constitution that conferred on the parliament 'the power to provide for the surrender of the whole or any part of the sovereignty of Ghana' once a Union of African States was formed (Getachew, 2019: 107): national independence was thus connected to an embracing of anticolonial internationalism.

Connected to such building of federations, which ultimately failed, Getachew explores the final form of anticolonial nationalist worldmaking: the demand for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). Getachew thus shows how 'second wave' anticolonial nationalists, such as Michael Manley and Julius Nyerere, developed Nkrumah's critique of neo-imperialism to show how formerly colonized nations were still vulnerable and exploited in an unequal global political economy – if not by other nations, then by private corporations. This meant that not only were the newly independent nations unequally integrated into the world economic system, but that their efforts of state building were also much more susceptible to the fluctuations of the international markets and private, corporate interests.



Thus emerged the demands for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). The Declaration for the Establishment of an NIEO, put to the UN in 1974, challenged the way that the UN's General Assembly – where each member has one vote – has the power to issue *legally binding international* economic policy. Anticolonial nationalists, such as Nyerere, pointed out that such formal, legislative equality that was granted to formerly colonized nations was not translated into a substantive equality – as Getachew (2019: 93) summaries: 'to say that Jamaica or Tanzania and the United States were equal members of the international order obfuscated the outsized economic dominance that the United States exercised and could deploy to compel dependent states'. Thus, Nyerere argued that an NIEO was needed such that newly independent states could have the freedom to pursue their own economic programmes, including the ability to nationalize industries under private control. To such nationalists, this NIEO was in fact a necessary prerequisite to achieve the UN's founding principle for international order: that of *sovereign equality*. In other words, anticolonial radicals used the principle of national sovereignty, and economic control over one's own nation, *again as a process through which we could achieve an anti-imperial world order*.

At the heart of Getachew's (2019: 2) book, therefore, is the principle that 'decolonization was a project of reordering the world that sought to create a domination-free and egalitarian international order'. Anticolonial nationalism, read through this lens, despite evoking principles of self-determination and national sovereignty, was always concerned with the grander transnational project of remaking the world in an equitable fashion.

## **Stretching the sociology of race across time and space**

While my review of these three books' arguments is fairly brief, I hope it is already apparent that despite making discrete arguments and contributions, they each share some fundamental similarities. Throughout the books, we see recurrent figures mentioned – from Du Bois, Padmore and Nkrumah, through to Gandhi, Churchill, and Woodrow Wilson – as well as analysis of key institutions and conferences – from the Gadar Party, based on the West Coast of the United States campaigning for Indian anti-colonialism, through to the League against Imperialism and the Pan-African Congresses. I want to now develop this review by focusing on three particular ways that these three books' transnational and historical scopes push forward the sociology of race.

### ***Racism at home, imperialism abroad***

Firstly, each of these three books makes the point that there is an inherent connection between racism 'at home' in the West, with Western practices of colonialism, imperialism, and neo-colonialism 'abroad'. Desai's (2020) discussion, for instance, interrogates how Du Bois saw racialised capitalism as the binding factor between the United States' exploitation of Black Americans with the

British empire's colonial apparatus, and how 'whiteness' offered a symbolic space of purity – a material and psychological wage – that impeded the white workers across the West to endorse an anti-imperialism. In his critique of racial capitalism, therefore, Du Bois argues that 'the English working classes are exploiting India [...] and the working classes of America are subjugating Santo Domingo and Haiti [...] He is a co-worker in the miserable modern subjugation of over half the world' (quoted in Desai 2020: 144). Similarly, Gopal (2019: 284) questions: 'How could the problem of race in the context of global imperialism be addressed in its specificity and as it intersected with the question of class and the exploitation of labour?' In exploring this question through the lens of dissent against the British empire, Gopal (2019: 441) presents the work of anticolonial Marxists – such as C. L.R James, Padmore, and Eric Williams – each of whom stressed that 'if empire was to be left behind, then the buccaneering capitalism that it had propagated would also need to be replaced with a more radically egalitarian system'. In advocating for a new 'radically egalitarian' alternative to global capitalism, these radicals sought to not just free those newly independent nations from the Global North's economic control, but also those 'postcolonial citizens' exploited in the metropolises itself. Lastly, Getachew (2019: 20–21) discusses the notion of a 'global Jim Crow', highlighting how rather than being an idiosyncrasy of the US South, 'the color line was an international phenomenon of which segregation and racial domination in the United States were only a domestic iteration'.

Indeed, it may seem almost too obvious of a point to make that racism is connected to the processes of colonialism and neo-colonialism. After all, 'the concept of race was thus the glue that stuck the colonial world order together, as it became common-sense knowledge that there was a global racial hierarchy which permitted the colonization of the "lesser" races by the dominant white Europeans' (Meghji, 2020a: 4). Nevertheless, if we look at dominant approaches in the sociology of race, then such transnational connections tend to be elided. Instead, much sociology of race tends to be characterised by a methodological nationalism in which it becomes sociologically viable – and advisable – to study racism within the confines of particular, discrete nation states (Meghji, Forthcoming). However, such methodological nationalism is not analytically useful for our current predicaments. It is the same social system that exploits the labour of children in China to make electronic goods, that exploits the (disproportionately Black and Brown) zero-hour contracted truck driver who delivers this product to its eventual owner in the West; it is the same imperialised-racialised principle that Islam is opposed to modernity that justifies the state surveillance of Muslims under the Patriot Act in the United States and the Prevent counter-terrorism programme in Britain, that justifies Western military intervention in the Middle East under the guise of civilizing the backwards world. While neither Getachew, Desai, or Gopal's books are explicitly about the links between racism and imperialism, they each highlight that there is a radical tradition of thought which has always analysed these two processes in tandem with one another. The fact that this tradition

already exists pushes me to my next point, as I argue that the sociology of race needs to adopt a more historical approach.

### *Looking backwards to move forwards*

While each of the three reviewed books use historical methods, each of them also reflects on our present conjunctures. Getachew (2019: 181) points out that the ‘worldmakers of decolonization’ offer an intellectual tradition through which to think about contemporary transnational movements such as ‘the Movement for Black Lives, the Caribbean demand for reparations for slavery and genocide, and South African calls for a social and economic decolonization’. Similarly, Gopal (2019: 448) argues the dispelling the myth of British colonial benevolence, and centering anticolonial agency, allows us to both move beyond the idea that Britain is a global superpower that has the legitimacy to intervene across the globe, as well as allowing ‘Britons to lay claim to a different, more challenging history [...] which can draw on multiple historical and cultural resources’. Lastly, Desai (2020) argues that his book highlights historical themes that still shape the present day, such as the United States’ claim of being the champion of liberalism and democracy while it still routinely kills many of its citizens (and those around the world).

In short, therefore, each of the three authors stress the necessity of having a historical sensibility to comprehend current situations and social processes. At the very same time as they are developing such temporal linkages, however, we are seeing increased attempts within the sociology of race to bifurcate the study of racism away from its historical roots in colonialism (and consequently, its contemporary basis in neo-colonialism). If we take critical race theory, for instance, Bonilla-Silva (2015: 74) even goes as far as to say that this paradigm ought to move beyond ‘the sins [of the] past (e.g., slavery, colonization, and genocide)’ in studying the ‘contemporary foundation’ of racism. Of course, Bonilla-Silva has apt reasons for his methodological scope – by reducing racism to being a consequence of past events, we lose sight of how racism continues because it still benefits people in the present day, who consequently maintain an interest in reproducing it. Nevertheless, we have to question whether being captured in a methodological ‘presentism’, which explicitly attempts to bifurcate the study of the present from its past, is analytically viable when it comes to the processes of racialisation and racism.

Very often, for instance, what we immediately think of as a social process specific to our present racialised social structure in fact has a much longer history informed by the logics of coloniality. For instance, consider the case of the militarisation of the police in the United States – a key issue in contemporary racism. As Go (2020) shows, such militarisation of the United States’ police started in the early 20th century primarily as a means of punitively surveying and controlling the racially subdominant. However, the tactics used by this police – such as the creation of mobile squads and intelligence divisions – derived from the United States’

military practices in their colonies (Go, 2020). In this regard, Go creates a *temporal* link between a contemporary issue of police militarisation with its historical origins, and also a *transnational* link between ‘racism at home’ with the US’ ‘imperialism abroad’ in a way that transcends bifurcated understandings of racialized processes.

Without necessarily having it as their primary focus, therefore, Getachew, Gopal, and Desai each show the possibilities for social analysis that can be opened up if we retain a historical focus when looking at contemporary society. Through appreciating the historical linkages with contemporary racism, we become better placed to connect with the various intellectual paradigms which dedicated themselves to dismantling this system in the fight for social justice. It is this theme of social justice that we now turn to.

### *Towards anti-racist, anti-colonial solidarities*

A recurrent theme runs through each of the reviewed books: the importance of forging transnational solidarities. Gopal (2019) shows how anticolonial radicals in Britain centred solidarity – in the sense of multicultural, transnational, cross-organisational coalitions – in their struggles against the British empire, meaning that thinkers in the metropolises, such as Frederic Harrison and Arthur Ballard, came to argue that the British ruling class’ fascism in the colonies, in the name of capital accumulation, could be connected with their exploitation of white British workers. Similarly, Desai’s (2020: 45) concept of ‘transnational refraction’ was built around the premise that anti-imperialists thought about colonialism and racism through the sense of shared struggle and solidarity, citing, for instance Saint Nihal Singh’s argument that there was a fundamental ‘link between the Asian migrant laborer [in the United States], the African American subject, and the colonized Indian, each connected the other by the sheer fact of being on the wrong side of the color line’. Desai (2020: 199) even concludes his book with the assertion that such transnational refraction is a prerequisite for solidarity, when he comments that: ‘solidarity emerges only out of a wilful act of seeing through the eyes of another, whose life we can only understand in glimpses’. Lastly, Getachew (2019: 145) too notes that anticolonial nationalists ‘fashioned Third World solidarity as a form of international class politics, and demanded redistribution on the basis that postcolonial states had in fact produced the wealth the West enjoyed’.

Each of these authors focuses on transnational, multicultural, multi-organisational forms of solidarity not because it is historically interesting, but because history has shown us that these forms of solidarity are *successful* and *necessary* in the struggles for social justice. I make this point not because the sociology of race is wilfully ignoring the importance of such solidarity, but because the issues of racism facing us in the contemporary and future world need to replicate these forms of solidarity fostered by the anticolonial radicals recounted in these three books. When we think of the climate crisis, for instance, a solidarity needs to be forged between the poor workers across the West (many of whom are

racialised as Black and Brown) who are disproportionately exposed to air pollution, with the environmental destruction faced by indigenous people across Latin America, Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand in the name of capital accumulation, who also in turn need to form a solidarity with those in South Asia facing starvation due to droughts, who in turn need to form solidarities with those in the Caribbean, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, where cyclones and hurricanes have been creating humanitarian crises. When we think of Islamophobia, we need to form a solidarity between those campaigning against the punitive surveillance of, and state violence towards, Muslims in the West, with those campaigning against the Uyghur detention camps in China, and the Hindutva violence towards Muslims in Kashmir. When it comes to race and racism, we are always talking about transnational, historically, epistemically, and spatially connected social processes, and – as Getachew rightfully highlights – ‘worldmaking’ processes of inequality require equally global solidarities and projects of resistance.

### **Situating the intellectual in the 21st century**

While *The United States of India*, *Worldmaking after Empire*, and *Insurgent Empire* are not intended to be ‘sociology of race’ books, they each can thus push forward the sociology of race. Especially through showing the value of transnational, temporally connected analysis, despite not intentionally being sociology books, each of these texts both shows the importance for the sociology of race to expand its methodological scope, and the fact that there are plenty of intellectual traditions out there from which the sociology of race can draw upon in its epistemic reworking. However, it is the recurrent theme of solidarity with which I want to conclude this review.

Each of these three books tells the story of anticolonial activists *who were also intellectuals*. To such thinkers, there was no such division between ‘scholarly work’ and activism. In the current day, however, intellectuals are regularly disregarded as being arm-chair theorists and disconnected from the ‘real’ world, while those intellectuals who do engage in activism are accused of being overly political and disregarding the tenet of objectivity. Gopal, Getachew, and Desai each show that, simply put, intellectuals matter – they can help forge solidarities between social movements, they can help influence understandings and key practices of concepts like freedom and liberty, and, as Getachew puts it, they can help remake the world.

In our current time, we are faced with a series of crises: from the coronavirus pandemic killing people by the thousands while the whole continent of Africa has fewer ventilators than the United Kingdom, far-right populism in all corners of the globe relegating ethnoracial minorities to daily violence, a climate crisis threatening the globe’s existence, and an ever increasing inequality between the super-rich and the destitute. In this era, Desai, Gopal, and Getachew’s book are not just inadvertently timely interventions in the sociology of race, but also in academia more generally. They each show the necessity that our work is

engaged with the world we are studying, in the hope that we can collectively make a better world for all.

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